

BACKGROUND

Christian Armenians had been the largest minority in Muslim Azerbaijan for over one thousand years until they were forced to flee Azerbaijan in 1988-1990. In 1988 there were close to 700,000 Armenians living in Azerbaijan.

Sumgait is a suburb of Baku, Azerbaijan, where the Armenian pogroms initiated in 1988. Jon Purizhansky's parents-in-law and his wife Kira witnessed the pogroms during which thousands of Armenian Christians had been killed and raped by mobs of Muslim Azerbaijanis.

THE POGROM

On February 27, 1988, large mobs made up of Muslim Azeris formed into groups that went on to attack and kill Armenians in both on the streets and in their apartments in Sumgait and Baku; widespread rape and looting and a general lack of concern from police officers allowed the situation to worsen. The violent acts in Sumgait were unprecedented in scope in the Soviet Union and attracted a great deal of attention from the media in the West.

Although the exact origins of the attacks are shrouded, there is some evidence that government officials had foreknowledge of the impending attacks. On February 27th, the Soviet Deputy Federal Prosecutor, Aleksandr Katusev broadcast a report in the evening, that was later carried by Baku Radio and Central Television, that two Muslims, Bakhtiar Guliyev and Ali Hajiyeve, aged 16 and 23, were purportedly killed by Christian Armenians in a skirmish between the two ethnic groups in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan on February 22nd. Katusev would later receive a stinging rebuke for revealing the nationalities of both the young men and the Armenians.

Forewarnings by Azerbaijanis sympathetic to their Armenian neighbors instructed them to leave their lights on the night of the 27th, those who shut it off were assumed to be Armenian. According to several Armenian witnesses and later on several Soviet military personnel, alcohol and opium were brought in trucks and distributed to the Muslim crowds in Sumgait. The crowds were provided with lists of Armenian households and were told to attack the households that had their lights off. Subsequent pogrom resulted in over a thousand casualties and rapes. By February 29th, the situation had worsened to the point where the Soviet government was forced to call for more professional, heavily armed troops and given the right to open fire. Additionally, tanks were moved in and ordered to cordon off the city. Unfortunately, neither the Azerbaijani government in Baku nor the central government in Moscow had been able to control the violence. Consequently, a great deal of Armenians had been slaughtered in and around Sumgait.

The Sumgait pogrom initiated a series of anti-Christian pogroms throughout Azerbaijan, culminating in the "Black January Massacre" of 1990. Despite the fact that by 1990 a great deal of Armenians had fled, over 150,000 of them still resided in and around Baku hoping that the "bad times are over" and believing in protection from Moscow. On January 12, 1990 the Nationalist Party of Azerbaijan with overt support from the Azerbaijan Government and Azerbaijan Police brought in thousands of rural Azerbaijanis into Baku for the purpose of organizing nationalistic meetings. In the meantime, the government announced a general amnesty and released thousands of Muslim prisoners. The

released convicts were bussed into the city center and were handed weapons. Alcohol and drugs were distributed among the convicts who joined the Muslim demonstrators brought in from outside Baku.

On the evening of January 13th, the Nationalist Party of Azerbaijan distributed lists of names and addresses of Armenian families in Baku. At approximately 9 P.M. the worst pogrom in the history of the Soviet Empire began. It lasted until January 19th. It was neither interrupted nor disturbed by the government or the police. Thousands of Armenians had been killed. Those lucky enough to survive fled Azerbaijan, leaving all their possessions behind. Immediately after the Armenian massacre, Azerbaijani Jews and non-Armenian Christians fled Azerbaijan fearing for their lives. Today, Azerbaijan is a minority-free Muslim country.

Jon Purizhansky's wife Kira and her parents hid an Armenian family during the pogrom in Baku. The family was able to leave Azerbaijan for Russia after the massacre stopped. Kira Purizhansky and her parents escaped to Israel.

THE REFUGEES

Armenia was unwilling to resettle all Azerbaijani Armenians as it could not afford the refugee resettlement program. Therefore, most Azerbaijani Armenians ended up in Russia after the pogroms. Russia agreed to grant them a Temporary Protected Status. Due to the fact that they had to flee unprepared, most of them did not have any money, clothing and documents.

The refugees were hoping that they would be comfortable living amongst fellow Christian Orthodox in Russia. However, wherever the refugees settled throughout Russia, they had been met with discrimination, persecution and outright hate. Armenians were different in Russia; i.e. their complexion was much darker, they spoke Russian with an accent, they were mostly educated and they competed with the locals for jobs and university quotas. After living in Russia for a year, Armenians faced overt persecution throughout Russia, which often turned violent.

In 1991, the United States Department of State issued a quota allowing Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan to enter the United States in refugee status under the Lautenberg Amendment. Almost all Armenian refugees were able to enter the United States in the early nineties. However, the quota was filled before all Armenians were able to enter the United States. Consequently, a number of families were separated, where a part of the family would be able to enter the United States, while another part was still in Russia encountering persecution.

JON PURIZHANSKY

Jon Purizhansky pled guilty to conspiracy to provide false information to the US government in trying to assist Mr. Avakov enter the United States. Levon Avakov's family escaped Azerbaijan for Russia after the pogroms. While Mr. Avakov's parents-in-law and his wife's three sisters were able to enter the United States as refugees, Levon Avakov, his wife and son were left behind in Russia as the refugee quota ran out. The offense was committed not for profit.